

The Idiosyncrasies of Globalization as a *Hyperobject*

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Due to the increased levels of globalization in recent times, the term *globalization* has become ubiquitous around the globe. The consequences of this phenomenon are omnipresent and touch the overwhelming majority of people on Earth, yet what really constitutes the subject of discussion, its nature and basic components, all seem to be arcane intricacies for those same people. What is more interesting is that the intelligentsia of the world – venerated scholars, prolific Nobel laureates, multiple-degree holders - cannot agree on a definition of globalization either. Reputable institutions of high education offer classes on globalization, classes that produce scholars who publish prolifically, win Nobel prizes, and obtain multiple degrees, only to come back to those same institutions and ask the same question: what is globalization? When observing this conundrum from a mega or hyper level, however, one can better understand why the plethora of differentiating opinions has emerged. This essay is going to properly define globalization in the category of *hyperobjects* and further delineate its characteristics as described by Professor Timothy B. Morton in *The Ecological Thought*.ⁱ

Professor Morton is a highly venerated scholar in the field of ecological and environmental sciences, and he wrote *The Ecological Thought* with the prime objective to define climate change as a *hyperobject*. Written in the most eloquent of terms, Professor Morton writes that *hyperobjects* are objects/processes that are “so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend spatiotemporal specificity [...]” In other terms, a *hyperobject* is something that is alive and has a zest of its own, but cannot necessarily be touched or expressed in simple empirical terms. Furthermore, this phenomenon is not easily definable in conventional terms of

space and time and thus a mega reading and definition of its characteristics are needed for a full understanding. Although Professor Morton focuses specifically on global warming as a *hyperobject*, while another great other example of a *hyperobjects* includes the financial market. The overwhelming majority of people today are aware of the existence of the economy and financial markets, but one cannot physically touch the economy as a table/chair/building can be touched, measured, and located. Following the same pattern of logic, one cannot ‘touch,’ ‘smell,’ or ‘count’ globalization, while everyone agrees that this *hyperobject* is ubiquitous and spans across generations of human lives. Deriving from the same idea that *hyperobjects* are too massively distributed in time and space, they are in a way ‘invisible’ to the human eye, which is also true of globalization. Furthermore, according to Professor Morton, *hyperobjects* share five commonalities that distinguish them from everything else: they are all viscous, molten, non-local, phased out, and inter-objective. This essay will analyze globalization in regards with these five characteristics shared by all *hyperobjects* and draw from selected readings in order to further illustrate and explain pertinent arguments.

In *The Ecological Thought*, the first applicable characteristic described relating to *hyperobjects* is non-locality. *Hyperobjects* are too massive in terms of space and they cannot manifest themselves locally over a short period in any particular fashion, thus making them imperceptible to the naked human eye. When discussing globalization and its origins specifically, it becomes evident why the world community cannot come to an agreement when globalization exactly emerged. For example, in *Globalization: A Short History*, authors J. Osterhammel and N. Petersson make a few attempts to delineate the exact time period in recorded human history during which globalization started happening. While Osterhammel and Petersson do an excellent job as historians by offering well-constructed arguments on a few time

periods in explaining why those should be considered as the moment when this phenomenon surfaced (the Kingdom of Alexander the Great, the Mongol Empire, the Industrial Revolution, etc.), it is evident that they are only postulating and never reaching a conclusion.ⁱⁱ On the other hand, C. Gopinath claims that the definition of globalization varies depending on the academic discipline and those who are concerned, and synthesizes a multitude of collected definitions in *Globalization: A Multidimensional System*. While Professor Gopinath also speculates with a few historical timeframes and places the beginning of globalization in them, he mostly supports the idea that this process emerged as a consequence of colonial imperialism. All of these references are points in time in which globalization was already present, in one shape or form. However, when looking from a mega or hyper level, these historical instances become almost minuscule. Osterhammel, Petersson, and Gopinath are making the right argument in all the wrong ways; *hyperobjects* cannot manifest themselves locally over a short period of time, and thus the origins of globalization as a *hyperobject* cannot be delineated in conventional terms. The debates revolving around the origins and exact birth moment of globalization all focus too narrowly and retreat to the accustomed tools used by all historians to measure and record time, which do not take into account the idea of *hyperobjects* and how all the plausible answers might be the right answers as well.

Professor Morton characterizes *hyperobjects* as viscous because of their ability to ‘defy’ or mold any other object according to their current, and the more other objects try to resist, the harder they will be trounced by the *hyperobject*. When describing a *hyperobject*’s viscosity with regards to humans, he describes the process as something that “sticks with [...] and penetrates us (humans).” Discussing globalization and looking at its relationship with humans as primary objects of interaction, the same observation can be made through the expansion of freer market

trade and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Scholars, the media, and everyday people are all weighing in on the benefits and disadvantages of the highly scrutinized trade agreement, but they mostly agree with the argument that it is far less advantageous for low-skilled workers. While Lori Wallach presents a case denouncing any advantages for the United States from NAFTA,ⁱⁱⁱ citing job losses across various industries, other prominent economics magazines have published the contradicting arguments claiming NAFTA has brought more benefits for the everyday people.^{iv,v} While it is cheaper to hire Mexican laborers for certain menial, low-skilled jobs, there is no evidence of an American neurologist losing his or her job to a poorly educated Mexican worker. Relating back to the idea that *hyperobjects* trounce/defy those individuals who do not adjust properly to the globalizing trends, it becomes logical that low-skilled jobs in a developed country would decrease in demand as those individuals performing them are usually not adequately prepared for the changes caused by globalization.

The third feature that Professor Morton ascribes to all *hyperobjects* is that they are molten in the sense that they are so big in every possible way, they refute the ideas that time and space are concrete, fixed and uniform. In terms of globalization, time is a relative construct and plays a large role in how one thinks of globalization. Professor Morton classifies time as a “neutral container,” and the gist of his argument is referring to time (and space) almost on a theoretical scale as time cannot literally stop or go backwards and the geographical landscape of Earth changes extremely slowly, but geological processes have a certain trace which, again, cannot go backwards. Thomas Friedman is one individual who would indubitably agree with this statement as he is unequivocal in his *New York Times* article “It’s a Flat World, After All.” Friedman, a U.S. native, experienced an epiphany during a business trip to Bangalore, India, when his Indian collaborator told him that “[t]he playing field is being flattened.”^{vi} Soon enough Friedman wrote

a book and capitalized on his epiphany, having come to the conclusion that the playing field under discussion is time, as Morton saw it, and how its theoretical concept has been completely redefined due to technological advancements made, making it possible for humans to manipulate it and even ‘peek’ into history in more direct ways from the present. It is widely accepted that technological advancements are products of globalization, and this is the exact instance where globalization has altered the notion of time.

Another prominent writer, Richard Florida, a senior editor at *The Atlantic*, wrote about how in theory, the way one thinks of space is also changing. In “The World Is Spiky,” Florida makes the argument that the megalopolises of today are growing, in terms of both population and economics, while the valleys, which tend to be less urbanized, are losing on both these fronts. This is making the world a ‘spikier’ place because cities are reaching new heights and valleys, areas of lesser development, are shrinking and disappearing. Florida is asking his readers to think in abstract and theoretical terms in order to understand his point. Cities are becoming spikier because they are more urbanized and offer far more opportunities for people than rural areas do, and this is due to globalization.^{vii} With this argument, the customary notion of space is also altered and Professor Morton is correct in his claim that *hyperobjects* bend time and space as one typically thinks about them because they are too massive to be conceptualized in a single, uniform manner.

The fourth characteristic of *hyperobjects*, according to Professor Morton, is inter-objectivity. Inter-objectivity means that *hyperobjects* are formed by simpler objects that are well-connected and intertwined as they depend and build on each other. One of the most illustrative examples of this concept comes from Pietra Rivoli’s *The Travels of a T-Shirt* and her examination of the entire history of U.S. cotton’s dominance on the world stage. Rivoli is clear

in her assumptions that first and foremost, it is the unique relationship between the U.S. government, farmers, science (research facilities and Universities), and markets that is a large and decisive factor in this perpetual dominance. She then goes back in history and delineates the exact public policies which were enacted, exact inventions which were put forward, how the farmers were adapting and accepting the newly found situations, and how and when the U.S. economy as a whole supported this entire process.^{viii} From here, it is explicitly clear that only with the close, intertwined work between these four objects (government, farmers, science and markets), the supremacy of U.S. cotton emerged and stayed in place for over 200 years, which makes it an important link in the global market and this makes it a part of the globalization *hyperobject*. Besides these four main objects relating to the world dominance of U.S. cotton, there are also international relations, water agreements, private interests, and many other smaller objects which are part of it, but this case perfectly illustrates Professor Morton's idea that *hyperobjects* are inter-objective and comprised of smaller objects that are closely linked together, or inter-objectively connected.

The fifth and last characteristic of *hyperobjects* is their enormously large phase dimension that is not perceptible by the naked human eye. The example that Professor Morton elaborates on is climate change. He meticulously names and counts all the devices and simulations needed in order to 'see' global climate change. Even in this case, the human eye does not see global change in the way the verb 'to see' is conventionally used, but rather on high-tech machines and screens created as products of decades-long work and advancement. The same argument can be made about globalization as well; globalization does not manifest itself in one single process or in one single outcome, and since globalization cannot be 'measured,' analysts and researchers would use a variety of different tests in order to pinpoint some of its parameters, size and age. For

example, one could compare the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), population size, literacy levels, Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), etc. of a certain country/region in the world at a specific moment in time, and this would still be an incomplete measurement for that country or region because it does not take other factors into account (such as Gross National Product, for example) and the numbers are constantly changing. Alas, one can see and measure certain aspects of globalization but the picture will never be complete because *hyperobjects*' dimensional phases are massive and immeasurable in simple and conventional terms.

This essay has shed light on the topic of globalization by classifying it in the correct category of *hyperobjects* and has described its idiosyncrasies based on the limited number of readings analyzed. Globalization will remain a highly divisive topic of discussion for many years to come as it is a process that is viscous, non-local, molten, inter-objective and phased out. The main issue most academics and many others encounter when debating globalization is narrowing too closely on the topic, contextualizing concrete examples on a mega or hyper scale and not taking into account the larger picture. Either way, globalization is widely felt in every corner of the Earth and its influences have been increasing in recent times, which is very likely to continue. Perhaps in the coming years the academic community will be able to agree on a concrete definition of globalization, how and why it emerged, and answer all other questions associated with this phenomenon, but at this point in time it is best to look at it through the lens of a *hyperobject* with its five defining qualities.

NOTES

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 7. Florida, Richard. "The World Is Spiky." *The Atlantic*, October 2005. Accessed January 30, 2017. <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/images/issues/200510/world-is-spiky.pdf>.
 8. Rivoli, Pietra. *The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power and Politics of World Trade*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005. Accessed January 30, 2017. [file:///home/chronos/u-734dd9330a8600e53a6afffbabb1d2171bced47e/Downloads/The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy.pdf](file:///home/chronos/u-734dd9330a8600e53a6afffbabb1d2171bced47e/Downloads/The%20Travels%20of%20a%20T-Shirt%20in%20the%20Global%20Economy.pdf).
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